

In a conversation with
Narendra Kusnur,
tabla maestro Ustad
Zakir Hussain pays
tribute to his father
Ustad Allarakha

Wah, Abbaji!

Tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain's residence is buzzing with activity. Telephones keep ringing, and files lie around. From one wall, a picture of his father and *guru* Ustad Allarakha observes the proceedings.

A day-long event is being planned to mark the first death anniversary of 'Abbaji' on February 3.

The agenda includes a special *tabla* tribute, performances by Kishori Amonkar, Pt Shivkumar Sharma, Vikku Vinayakram, Ustad Sultan Khan, L Shankar and Zakir, a documentary screening, folk percussion sessions and a grand finale that'll



PASSING ON THE LEGACY: Allarakha

include international musicians John McLaughlin, Giovanni Hidalgo and Sikiru Adepoju.

At the conclusion of a lengthy meeting, Zakir takes time off for an exclusive interview. He looks at that picture, as though he's asking for permission to begin speaking. Once he gets going, words move as fast as his fingers during a concert. What follows for the next hour is a personal and heartfelt tribute from a proud son to his proud father, from a brilliant disciple to his brilliant teacher.

The earliest memories: My first memory is of Abbaji playing in a concert, and me sitting behind. I must have been three or four. He'd begin playing after the *alaap*, and I just couldn't stop smiling. I would put my face down so that others couldn't see me smile. There was that kind of pride, that kind of joy at having arrived at such a great musical event.

Such concerts would take place in various cities of India. Once, he asked me to play with (*sarod* maestro) Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, and I felt the sudden need to go to the bathroom and throw up in nervousness. I must have been nine or 10. At another concert I remember this elderly gentleman telling Abbaji that he wanted me to play with him. Soon, I discovered that this gentleman was (vocalist) Pt Omkarnath Thakur.

As a child, I was thoroughly involved with my father's concerts. But all that probably happened because when I was a baby, Abbaji would hold me in his arms and continuously hum rhythms in my ears. I guess the chip was installed in my brain at that time. So my actual initiation into the world of percussion began when I was a baby.

The father and the guru: Abbaji's

relationship with me as a father was different from what it was as a *guru*. As long as he was my *guru*, he wanted me to get on stage and play. He never bothered whether I felt nervous or not because he knew only regular shows would sharpen my skills. If he felt I should go to Patna for a concert, I couldn't say no under any circumstances.

But as a father, he cared. If my hand was stuck in a door, he almost had a heart attack. If we got only one berth in a train, he'd ensure that I slept, while he sat at the corner of the seat. He would send me to Patna, but he'd also ensure that somebody was there to look after me.

The initiation of the brothers: My brothers Fazal and Taufiq are extremely talented. And though they have been truly inspired by Abbaji, it was I who initiated them. This was because when Fazal was a kid, Abbaji would be touring abroad with Pt Ravi Shankar. So my brothers started observing me and learning from me. As children, they'd even be scared of me.

Abbaji's foreign visits: Whenever he was abroad, Abbaji would stay in touch. He wouldn't write long letters, but instead send picture postcards showing his hotel. He'd circle his hotel room, as if to say: "Hey, this is where I am."

He'd bring home lots of records — he'd always get records of drummer Buddy Rich, whom he interacted with regularly. For me, he'd get records of the Rolling Stones and popular rock bands.

The '60s were a great learning time. If we grew up on Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Bismillah Khan, we also listened to Madan Mohan, Shankar-Jaikishan, Jaidev, Khayyam and Roshan. We tuned in to jazz and rock too, and Abbaji never stopped me from listening to other styles.

During his visits, Abbaji had been exposed to experimental music. So when I got involved with fusion proj-

ects, he never complained. He'd say: "*Karo jo karna hai*, but don't forget your identity." He'd remind me that India had something unique to offer through music.

Abbaji was absolutely right. Indian music gives you a chance to improvise, to be spontaneously creative. Today, I can apply my *tabla* training to bongos, congos, djembes and even the drum.

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SON RISE: Zakir Hussain

Wah Abbaji!

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His biggest contribution: Obviously, Abbaji is best known for the way he popularised the *tabla*. Apart from Ahmed Jaan Thirakwa-saab, audiences didn't know too many *tabla* players. Abbaji's genius lay in the way he took that instrument and made it do things it had never done before.

When Pt Ravi Shankar played, people would be extra-delighted if they knew Abbaji was playing with him. The *tabla* began gaining acceptance, and audiences began to get interested in whether Abbaji, Pt Kishen Maharaj or Pt Chatur Lal would be playing that night. Today, percussionists across the world accept Abbaji's sound production techniques and ability to interact with other musicians on stage.

Though he was illiterate, he was yet so communicative as a musician. The *tabla* was his life. He worshipped the *tabla* and he worshipped Saraswati.

Teaching his disciples: I've come across many teachers who want their students to inspire them. With Abbaji, it was the other way around. He would get excited whenever he sat with students, and he would inspire them to do better. That's why he was so much in love with his school, so passionate about teaching.

For each student, it was a challenge to do something that would make him say '*Kya baat hai*'. I was no exception. I always tried to play something that would make him wonder how I did that.

A time of sadness: Around this time last year, Sultan Khan-saab, Fazal and I were in Calicut for some concerts, when I got a message asking me to urgently call home in Bombay. I was told my sister Razia had died. I was in total shock, though I felt somebody was telling a horrible lie.

As there were no flights from Calicut, we drove to the nearest airport. After a while, I called home again when I was told that Abbaji was also dead. I just couldn't believe it. I didn't tell either Sultan Khan or Fazal, but when Fazal decided to call Abbaji, I had to tell them.

When I reached home in the morning, I was moved to find many musicians already sitting there — Pandit Jasraj, Pt Shivkumar Sharma, Pt Hariprasad Chaurasia, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan. They were consoling my mother, and I was touched by the respect everybody showered on the family. It was just an evidence of the love and affection he inspired in everybody.

Later, at the last rites, Ravi Shankar came just in time. Asha Bhosle, Ram Narayan, Shobha Gurtu, Jatin-Lalit, everybody was there from the music world. All this just reinforced my belief that Abbaji's life has been a success, and that he had no regrets when he left.

A year later: The February 3 show will partly pay homage to the maestro, and partly a celebration of the life, fight and knowledge that was Allarakha. Abbaji's existence has made all us who were associated with him wiser in terms of what we've learnt about time and rhythm.

Today, I have to take care of my mother, and look after my father's school. But for all of us, Abbaji lives on. It's just that he might be on another planet, but he's still here in our minds and hearts.